

DETERMINANTS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ORADEA

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The present paper is part of the research of the PhD thesis made by the author, having the title: Community Participation in Oradea, registered at the University of Oradea - Faculty of Social and Human Sciences. The general objectives of the paper are the explanation of different types of citizens' involvement in the life of their community, the investigation of the existing relationships between different forms of participation, the interpretation of the effects different forms of participation have on the studied communities and the identification of relevant mechanism for the stimulation social involvement.

The citizens' political and civil participation, social responsibility, community spirit, civic activism together with other concepts from the civil society's rhetoric entered the agenda of public debates together with the intensifying efforts for adhering to the European Community, being the subject of numerous studies conducted in this field. The need for a strong civic society, with interested and involved citizens in the life of the community which they belong to, for social and economical development belong to the same discourse of the strong democratic society, being challenged in the literature, starting with Tocqueville, Almond and Verba, to Putnam and many others. In parallel to the civil society's rhetoric and the analysis coming from this direction, are the studies and theories of community development, which on one side are based on development policies, regulations, institutional framework of development, but contain also aspects of citizens' involvement in evaluating the community problems, the decision making processes and in the actual implementation of solutions. Moreover the aspects of network belonging and social trust which are reflected in the concept of social capital are sources both for participation as well for economic and social development.

*The present paper reflects the analysis of the determinant factors which can increase the engagement rates in the community life of the Romanians, engagement which is relevant on the production of different types of collective goods. The analysis is based on data obtained with the CEEX research, coordinated by Adrian Hatos, "Leaders, Participants and Viewers. Determinants of community participation in the urban Romania". The tested hypotheses in the research part, based on the results of different studies and theoretic approaches, derive from the general question of the paper: **which are the factors that determine the community participation of the people living in Oradea**. Thus, the participation variation is verified by: gender, age, social status, social capital, civic competence, leadership experience, participation opportunities. The main results suggest that community participation is explained by civic competence, well-being, bridging social capital, gender and age.*

Key words: community participation, community development, civic activism.

JEL codes: D17, H41

1. Theoretical framework, work hypotheses

Regarding participation types in the community, we can identify more types which sometimes, just like Marinetto (2003) and Kim and Bearman (1997) pointed out, depend, besides the citizens' motivations, also on the political or social environment in which participation manifests and on the political definition given to participation. These forms can cover a large spectrum of actions, from protesting the authorities' decisions, to participation at different public debates, associative participation for the community, volunteer work or helping actions to charity to underprivileged categories. Thus, we can say that any action of the individuals for producing desirable collective goods represents community participation and thus civic participation is a particular type of this kind of engagement in the community.

Following one of Marc Morje Howard's (2002) arguments, developed also by Hatos (2008), we consider that civic participation in post-communist countries is lower compared to Western countries because people here are skeptical when it comes to involvement in formal non-governmental organization, for different reasons (the memory of communist organizations, considering these NGOs as part of the western hegemonic system, inability of these organizations to meet the needs of the citizens or reduced access to them). Nevertheless, it is possible for the Romanians to avoid involvement in the classical organizations of the civil society, but to act through other networks such as families or neighborhoods in ways that produce collective goods. This argument is supported by the data of our research, participation rates at different community activities being higher than belonging to an NGO, but this data has to be analyzed carefully as there is no direct correspondence between the two types of participation.

Some of the analyses highlights the civil society's weaknesses and explains them mostly through the low levels of social trust. Thus, the connections are made between social trust and low levels of civic participation, NGO memberships, weak social connections and corruption (Uslaner: 2003), (Badescu: 2001), (Howard: 2003). The lack of involvement is influenced by the lack of trust (both institutional and general) which was weakened by the communist regime (Hann: 1996). The same arguments are used for explaining the decline of civic involvement from the western societies, yet the sources for mistrust are different (Putman: 2000).

Factors that explain low rates of participation in Romania are education, profession, gender, home environment, the participant's profile being a young male, from an urban environment, educated with previous experience in civic participation (CSDF: 2003). Previous involvement in organizations was analyzed in a different manner by Hatos (2008), the author focusing on the relationship between the present civic involvement and the activism in the communist period, demonstrating the existence of a positive relationship argued with the fact that the previous activism represented both a learning context of the abilities necessary for the success of the action and a framework for developing a specific social identity (Dodescu and Hatos: 2004).

The effects of participation can be seen in two main directions: the first connection mentioned above is the civil society arena in which intrinsically refers to the role citizens (individually or in networks) have in sustaining democracy. A good, democratic society cares for all its citizens and aims at improving the quality of life for all, thus the involvement of people in public affairs should be an asset in grating this social developmental goal. Secondly, the theories of development emphasize the importance of social capital, seen as the ability to gain access to resources due to membership in different networks characterized by trust among members as well as common knowledge and experience of previous actions (Portes: 1998, Ostrom: 2000). Consequently, participation and membership in networks is an important source of development.

D. Sandu (2005) defines community participation as being the process of involvement of the members of a community in actions "that follow the fulfilling of certain local needs, predominantly local and public or group type" (p.43). This participation is predominantly voluntary, but it can also be involuntary when it is not known who is going to benefit from this action or when there are some pressures to stimulate participation. Iuliana Precupetu (2003)

analyzes both theoretically and empirically, the connection between social participation, social capital and poverty. According to literature, the author presents a few factors that influence participation: civic competence (seen as the individuals' perception regarding their capacity of influencing the decisions of those in charge) and political involvement, cultural behavior, access to public facilities (well-being indexes), satisfaction regarding the possibility to be part of the social life, quality of the social and political environment, satisfaction regarding the possibility to be part of the decision making process at different levels and information.

Another factor that was highlighted by A. Hatos (2008) as having a role in explaining community participation is having a leading position, both before the revolution and after, both in the political hierarchy and the one from the field of work. By means analysis of the scores of individual participation and having different leading positions, the author demonstrates the positive relationships between these, highlighting the strong connection between having a leading position by the members of the family for individual participation.

These relationships are tested in the present analysis, explaining the community participation rates of the people living in Oradea according to the available data, verifying the following research hypotheses: [1] A. Young people are going to participate more than older people; B. Retired people are going to participate more than mature people: they have more time, but may have problems that can affect their participation; [2] People with higher social status are going to participate more than those with a lower status. The status is going to be analyzed in two dimensions: educational level (number of completed study years) and well-being indexes (incomes per home, goods in home); [3] As social capital rises, community participation rises as well - social capital is measured according to its two distinct dimensions: belonging to social networks (intensity of the networks: time spent with friends and their density: number of friends) but also social trust; [4] Civic competence or the sense of personal efficiency raises the chances of participation. Civic competence is measure through the answers to the questions: to what degree do you think you can influence de decisions from the country of town); [5] They had leading positions that worked either as contexts for learning abilities and knowledges needed for a successful participation, or as instances for developing a specific social identity; [6] Participation is influenced by the context in which it occurs: the lack of contexts/ opportunities to participate has a inhibitive effect on it.

2. Data and methods

For the second stage of the CEEEX project presented in the introductory section questionnaires were applied to a random sample of 461 people from various areas of the city of Oradea, in October 2007. The sample includes 50% men and 50% women, aged between 18 and 86 with a rather equal distribution according to category of age.

2. a. The dependent variable:

In our research community participation has been recorded through questions regarding participation rates to various activities on the level of neighborhood, as shown in chart 1.

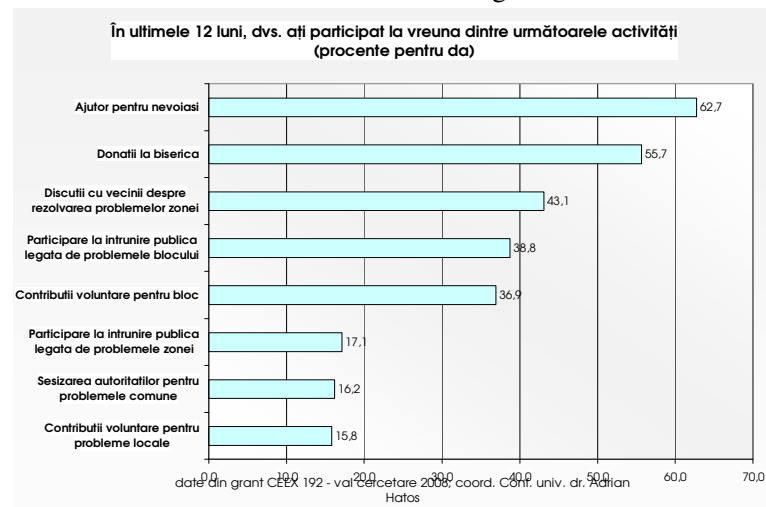


Chart no. 1 – Community participation forms and rates in Oradea

In order to analyze the determinants of community participation a summative scale has been created, based on these variables ($\alpha > .811$), with the minimal value of 0 and a maximum value of 8 activities for the respondents to participate, the average being 2.8.

2.b. Independent variables

The gender of respondents is introduced in the analysis as a dummy variable with 1 as value for males. Age is a continuous variable measured used as such in the analysis.

Social status is measured on two dimensions: level of education measured in years of study on one hand and household assets on the other. The variable referring to years of study completed is the outcome of the recodification of the categorical variable last school the respondent graduated from, thus resulting the scale variable used. As for the economical status we have chosen as explanatory variable household goods that we consider relevant to exemplify household welfare in time. Personal income or income per household, beyond the potential errors resulting from calculations made in Ron or Rol is more variable in time and has a higher non response rate. In order to introduce household assets in the analysis we created as summative scale of assets.

Social capital was included in the analysis on several distinct dimensions: intensity of networks, their density and generalized trust. The intensity of networks to which an individual belongs is calculated by answers to the question: how much time do you spend with your friends with the following potential responses: weekly, a few times per month, a few times per year, no time at all that has been turned into dummy variables keeping the *no time at all* category as reference. Density of networks is calculated through a scale of the extensive social capital built as an average value of responses to three questions: 'how many friends do you have?', 'how many friends do you have that you can borrow a small amount of money from?' and 'how many friends do you have that you can borrow a large amount of money from?'.

Personal effectiveness, or civic competence, was introduced in the analysis as an average scale of answers to the questions: 'To what degree do you think that people like you can influence important decisions regarding: the community/ the entire country?'. Positions of management

were followed through responses to a set of 14 items for which a summative scale was designed by adding up the 'yes' answers after a dichotic recodification of variables.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Std. Dev.
age	376	18,00	86,00	42,5452	16,43470
most recent school graduated from measured in years of study	384	,00	8,00	4,5703	1,78191
Household assests scale	448	,00	12,00	8,1429	2,74610
Efficacy scale	431	1,00	4,00	1,7645	,74451
Density of social capital	336	,00	28,67	4,8482	4,16796
free time spent with friends weekly	461	,00	1,00	48,37%	,50028
free time spent once or twice a month	461	,00	1,00	31,24%	,46396
free time spent once or twice per year	461	,00	1,00	11,06%	,31401
Social trust scale	430	,00	4,00	2,2312	,69982
Leading positions scale	449	,00	11,00	1,5924	2,13099
Valid N (listwise)	264				

Chart no 1. Description of independent variables

3. Analyses

3.a. The effect of context on community participation

One of the aspects that have been traced in the analyses was the actual participation according to opportunities available for each individual. This was possible due to the fact that one of the response options to the question was: *not applicable*. To this purpose two distinct scales were created: one of absolute participation and one of relative participation, the latter taking into account situations where participation was not applicable. For absolute participation ($\alpha > .811$) we have built a summative scale of the cases in which participation to one of the activities in the list of variables was reported. The average value of the scale is 2.81 with a min. of 0 and a max. of 8 activities to participate in, with left inclination and a skewness value of 0.232.

For the scale of relative participation we have eliminated those cases where 'not applicable' was reported for each action. The difference between the distribution of relative participation and that of absolute participation is rather similar, with an average of 3.9 and a skewness value of 0.231. When comparing the averages of the two variables, there is a significant difference between them to be observed ($t = -29.61$, $p = 0.00$). The dispersed distribution of the responses on this second scale make is less suitable for future analyses, therefore it will not be used further here.

As a conclusion of the comparison between absolute and relative participation, it may be said that the people of Oradea participate in less than half (39.91%) of the activities they have the opportunity to participate so that the arguments that explain the lack of community activism through the absence of contexts in which citizens can get involved can be refuted to some extent. This is indicative only of the fact that the explanation of the low rate of community participation needs to be sought elsewhere and does not dismiss the creation of contexts for activism, at least as context for acquiring the knowledge and the abilities required for a successful participation. Consequently, for the available data, we dismiss *hypothesis no. 8* which maintains that community participation varies according to the context that enables or inhibits it.

3.b. Determinants of community participation

In this section, through multiple regression analysis we will outline the factors that explain community participation and the level to which they contribute to these explanations according to the formulated theoretical hypotheses.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION ABSOLUTE SCORE	B	S.E.	Beta
(Constant)	,280	,909	
gender of dummy respondent – male	-,688	,229	-,175
age of respondent	,004	,009	,030
Education	-,026	,071	-,023
scale of household assets	,221	,051	,283

scale of personal efficiency/ civic competence	,460	,165	,165
social capital - density	,019	,029	,040
free time spent with friends weekly	-1,180	,512	-,300
free time spent with friends one or twice a month	-,777	,498	-,187
free time spent with friends one or twice per year	-,116	,635	-,014
scale of social trust	,288	,182	,094
absolute scale of holding a leading position	,261	,062	,271
Adj. R	0.188		

** coefficients in bold represent significant effects for $\alpha < .05$

Chart no. 2. Regression chart for the community participation dependent variable.

The model explains 18% of the variation of community participation as absolute score. The gender of subjects, as well as their age, are predictors of community participation but contrary to hypotheses formulated based on other studies on the same topic. On the other hand, according to our data, women participate more, in other words, the female gender is a predictor of participation. In this case it is possible that the difference is in the distinct forms of participation analyzed: men are oriented towards other types of actions including civic and associative ones, while women are involved more in activities closer to the household.

In this model one of the factors that explains most of the variation is represented by the scale of goods, which is thus a good predictor of community participation in the sense that an increased level of endowment of the household enhances the increase of community participation. Nevertheless, the second indicator of social status, education does not influence participation in the case of our sample. This conclusion points at the social structure of the current urban Romania where cultural and financial capital are not facets of the social status: there are wealthy people with no education, as well as poor people with education and as far as community participation is concerned financial aspects appears to be more important than the educational.

Perceived effectiveness is also a factor that explains participation: the more a person feels that he/she can influence decisions, the more likely is the person to participate in actions on the level of community. Here we can argue that strategies that stress *empowerment* have more chances to succeed, since the feeling of responsibility and that of effectiveness cumulated are important resources of community activism, as other studies have shown it (Dodescu, Hatos 2004).

Also, our analyses confirm the significant role of social capital in explaining community participation: people who are part of dense social networks (have a large number of friends) participate more in the solving community problems. However, the intensity of relations (meeting friends on a weekly or monthly basis) has a negative effect on participation, thus supporting the theories of weak relations as well as the significance of bridging social capital for participation and development. Generalized social trust is not a predictor of community participation.

Another factor that proves to be relevant in explaining community participation is represented by the issue of holding management positions, either in the professional or in the political life, before and after 1898. In other words, people who have or had management positions participate more in actions on the level of neighborhood. This is indicative of the fact that either acquiring the knowledge and the abilities of a successful participation or the creation of a role identity specific to social activists are important mechanisms in promoting participation.

4. Conclusions and discussions regarding community participation

As a conclusion, it can be said that as far as community participation in Oradea is concerned, the following hypotheses are confirmed or modified:

- People from wealthier social categories have a higher rate of participation;
- Density of social networks increases participation while their intensity decreases it;
- Women participate more in community actions than men;
- Older people participate more than young people but participation decreases with age;
- The level of education does not explain community participation;

- Generalized social trust does not explain community participation.

Generally speaking we may say that these results point to the fact that it is possible that on the level of the urban communities in Romania community participation has a distinct profile than civic participation traditionally measured as associative participation in NGOs. This could be the reason for not finding support for some of the tested. Consequently, we formulate the hypothesis that will be tested in the future, namely that in terms of adherents, community participation is highly different from associative participation.

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